

Public perception of forests as a motor for change: the case of Kenya

M.K. Gachanja

In Kenya, the public is widely aware of the vital functions of forests, and public protest has been instrumental in halting private land development on gazetted forest land.

In the past few years, changes in the use of Kenya's reserved (gazetted) forest land for purposes other than forestry have attracted popular disapproval and resulted in growing public support for forest conservation. The public has become more enlightened over the dwindling area of gazetted forest (currently estimated as 2 percent of the country's land area) and the implications of forest loss. One of the reasons for the people's concern has been the widespread belief that forest degradation in the country was the cause of the devastating drought in 1999/2000, and the feeling that continued forest loss in the country would further impoverish the nation. Kenyans are aware of the vital functions of forests in the provision of water and electricity. Some 70 percent of Kenya's electricity is hydro-generated and therefore depends on the existence of forests.

Public protest has been instrumental in halting private development on gazetted forest land that was being "allocated" – in other words, removed from protection – and given to land developers despite legal proscriptions against this. Two particularly controversial cases were the intended development of a housing project within Nairobi's Karura Forest in 1998 and the de-gazetting of more than 67 000 ha of forest land from 12 forests countrywide in 2001. Both were stopped largely because of public protest. Public involvement has also precipitated the drafting of a new forest bill and the implementation of measures to curb forest degradation in the country.

People have become empowered in forestry decision-making in large part through the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society movements. Their efforts have been coordinated under the umbrella of the Kenya Forests Working Group (KFWG), which brings together all

parties concerned with forests and their conservation and management – including NGOs, government professionals and concerned citizens – in regular dialogue. Participants range from pastoralists to birdwatcher groups to government, including members of the Forest Department and Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). By working to promote enforcement of laws and regulations, KFWG and its constituents have rallied extensive public support which has led to improvement in the management of the country's forest resources.

FOREST RESOURCES IN KENYA

Forests rank high among Kenya's important natural resources. They conserve water and soil, improve agriculture and serve as reservoirs of biological diversity. They are a source of forest products for a variety of uses in addition to being a source of revenue for individuals, communities, the private sector and the nation as a whole. They provide the rural population with building materials, softwood requirements for wood-based processing industries, 90 percent of household energy consumption, fodder and fruits. Forestry and wood processing industries are estimated to provide direct employment to 35 000 people (Gathaara, 1999). Forests are therefore an integral part of national development.

Although forest products and services in Kenya are estimated to contribute about €90 million to the economy, and although the forest sector employs 50 000 people directly and another 30 000 indirectly, the forests nevertheless tend to be undervalued (Emerton and Karanja, 2001) and accordingly they are often poorly managed.

Despite changes in Kenyan society and the development of new approaches to natural resource management, policy decisions on forests are still based on a policy that was formulated in 1957.

Michael Kiama Gachanja is the Coordinator of the Kenya Forests Working Group, Nairobi, Kenya.

This policy, revised slightly in 1968, concentrated on catchment protection and timber production, with strong government control (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 1994). The policy excludes local resource users from decision-making related to changes in the use of forests, which often do not favour local community interests. The poor management is manifested by loss of forest land through unwarranted excision – removal of forest from the national forest estate – for settlement and other uses. Between 1994 and 1999, 55 700 ha had either been excised or proposed for excision (Njuguna, Mbegera and Mbithi, 1999). The inadequate management of forest resources has contributed to a substantial economic loss to the country, which has been one of the catalysts of public reaction.

BEGINNINGS OF PUBLIC CONCERN

The public concern over forest management was roused in 1995 by a proposal to allocate parts of the coastal Arabuko Sokoke Forest, reknowned internationally for diversity of bird species, for settlement of people purported to be landless. These allocations could have opened the way for deforestation on 5 000 ha of the forest, and were not in line with the recommendations of the Kenya Forestry Master Plan of 1994 (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, 1994) and the 1996 World Conservation Union (IUCN) report to the effect that the country should not lose any more forest (IUCN, 1996). The public perceived that such allocations would generally have benefited a few powerful individuals who would have profited from the land either by selling it or gaining political capital.

The public protest that followed these proposals resulted in the halting of the allocation of any part of Arabuko Sokoke Forest. The public recognized that defor-

estation in allocated parts of this forest would have a negative impact on the diversity of birds found in the forest (some of which are rare and threatened) and the ecotourism potential of the forest. Arabuko Sokoke Forest is located in the area of one of the most important tourist destinations in the country – the coastal town of Malindi. With support from NGOs, KFWG members collected signatures of those opposed to the proposed allocations and presented them to the government, which then announced that the proposed alteration of the forest boundaries would not be effected.

The case of Arabuko Sokoke Forest was followed by the allocation of half of the 1 063 ha Karura Forest (an urban forest) to private developers between 1996 and 1998. Located in the capital city of Kenya, Karura Forest provides a vital refuge from city life. Residents were concerned about the clearing of a forest important for water catchment functions and of great potential value for the relaxation, recreation and education of the people of Nairobi. The revelation of the threat to Karura Forest, made public by the residents of adjoining forest areas, resulted in demonstrations, public prayer meetings and encounters with developers, calling for cancellation of the allocations. The demonstrations, some of which culminated in destruction of property belonging to the developers, succeeded in halting development in the area in 1999.

In their efforts to save Karura Forest, the local residents had quite a number of supporters, including the Architectural Association of Kenya, the Environment Trust of Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya, opposition parties, the Kenya Human Rights Commission, the Law Society of Kenya and a cross-section of political and religious leaders. Residents and supporters organized several tree planting functions as a way

of expressing their constitutional rights and willingness to protect their natural resources. As a result of the spirited efforts by residents, conservationists, churches, organizations, students and the private sector, some of the companies contracted to develop the area pulled out, saying that they had been misled into thinking that the plots were not part of Karura Forest.

In the above two cases, the public discussion, combined with civic education and proactive media activities, raised people's awareness of the role of forests in the national economy and their sense of ownership of the country's natural heritage.

PUBLIC PROTEST OVER THE ALLOCATION OF FURTHER FOREST LAND

Notices that 67 185 ha were to be excised from the national forest estate were posted in the official Kenya Gazette of 19 October 2001, following the announcement of such intentions in the gazette on 17 February 2001. The stated rationale for the excisions was that these forest areas had been settled by squatters and by definition could not be considered forest land, and some of these lands were to be used for the settlement of landless people.

With assistance from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), KFWG conducted aerial surveys in the affected forest areas and photographed parcels of these forests. These images clearly demonstrated to the public and to the government that most of the excised forests were still intact forests.

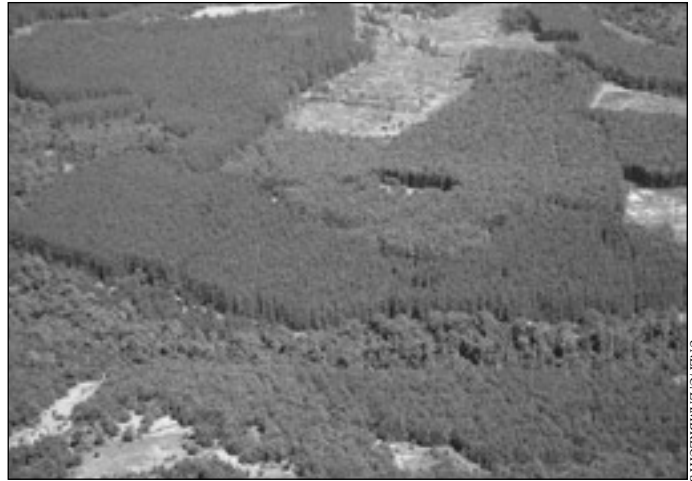
No fewer than 12 forests would have been affected. The consequences would have been especially serious for two of the country's five principal catchment areas: the Mau Escarpment and Mount Kenya. Fifteen percent of the Mau complex of forests, which encompasses the watershed for nearly half of Kenya's major rivers west of the Rift Valley (see Map, p. 62),

was listed for excision. The tracts of forest cited for excision from these two “water towers” accounted for 7 percent of the forest left in all five catchments.

The implications for wildlife and tourism would also have been serious. Such excisions would affect both the quantity and the quality of the water flowing into Lake Nakuru, thus affecting food availability in the lake and threatening the world’s largest concentration of lesser flamingoes. Lake Nakuru is protected under the Ramsar Convention. Its value as one of Kenya’s most popular parks, the second highest in revenue, would perhaps disappear with the flamingoes. The flow of the Mara River, which supplies the world-renowned Masai Mara Game Reserve and Serengeti ecosystems, would also have been affected. The main forested catchment area for the Mara River declined from 752 km² in 1973 to 493 km² in 2000, and it has been predicted that the effects of further deforestation at the catchment – increased irrigation and diversion of water from one of the tributaries of the Mara River – would in future lessen the flow rate of the Mara River to levels lower than the water consumption in Serengeti during times of drought (Gereta *et al.*, 2002).

The proposed excisions were greeted with a barrage of public complaints in the local media and at gatherings around the country, on a scale quite unprecedented in Kenya. The intentions prompted the international conservation group Action for Endangered Species to withdraw an international award that it had intended to present to the Kenyan Government in March 2001 for its stand in 2000 against a resumption of the global trade in ivory. Within 14 days of the announcement, 28 148 signatures from individuals opposed to the excisions had been collected. By April 2002, some 200 000 signatures had been collected and presented to one of the parliamentary committees

Aerial photograph taken on 4 March 2001 in the proposed excision area of Mau Forest, Kenya



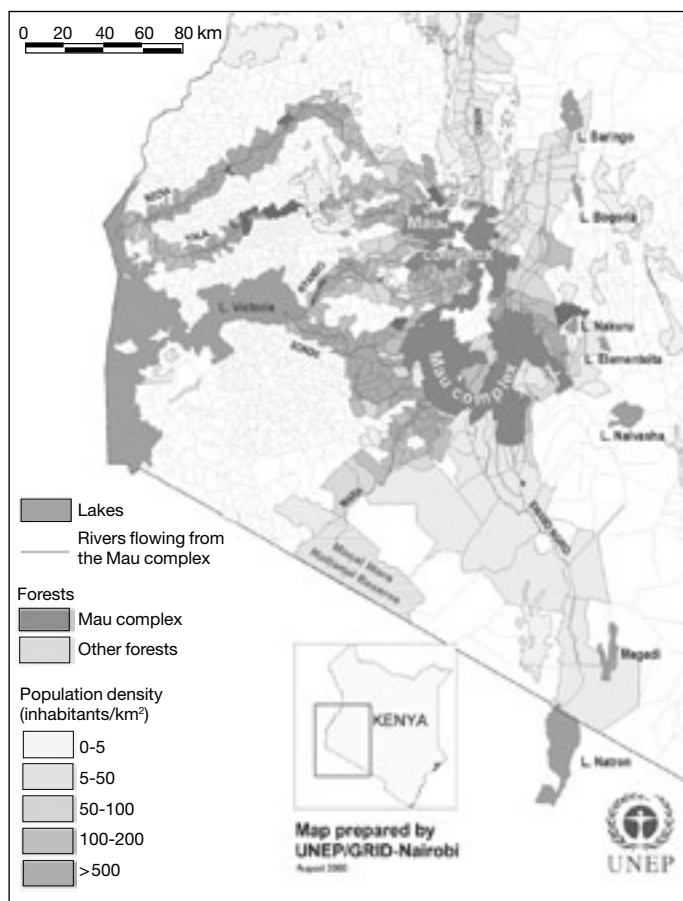
UNEP/C. LAMBRICHS

that deals with environment. The excisions were also denounced in public fora. KFWG launched an extensive advertising campaign to solicit support. Talk shows were held on television and radio, and leaflets and other publicity materials were distributed. KFWG and its members asked bilateral agencies and donors to use any means available to them to pressure the government to reverse the decision. Churches and other religious organizations also came on board, educating their congregations on the threat to this natural resource.

The public protest sparked by the information provided led to unmatched protests and objections, both official and non-official. NGOs, community-based organizations and the private sector objected to the excisions, citing the implications of forest loss and breaches of Kenyan and international laws. The excisions were contrary to the recommendations of published government plans and would have contravened international agreements ratified by Kenya (which include the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Ramsar Convention and the Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage).

Following indications by the government that it would not give in, legal proceedings were initiated. One of the suits, filed by an environmental lawyer, was thrown out of court on the basis of procedural technicalities. Three others were filed by the Ogiek community (descended from the aboriginal inhabitants of one of the forests in the Mau complex); by five NGOs and the environmentalist Wangari Mathaai (now an assistant Minister in the Ministry of Environment); and by the East African Wildlife Society, the Environmental Liaison Centre International, the Kenya Alliance of Residents Association and the Law Society of Kenya. The last three suits have stopped the government from altering, diminishing, alienating, clearing or allocating to any private developer, or to anybody, any part of any of the forests excised until the cases are heard and determined.

Public scrutiny over management of forest resources has managed to bring positive changes in their management. Although a lasting solution is yet to come, most probably through enactment of a new Forest Act, the government has taken measures to contain the extensive forest degradation in the country. These measures include staff changes in the Forest Department, a ban on harvesting



The Mau complex, a critical water catchment area in Kenya

In conclusion, the case of Kenya provides a lesson to those who make decisions that are detrimental to forests: they cannot avoid the spotlight of transparency and accountability. ♦



Bibliography

- Emerton, L. & Karanja, F.** 2001. *Valuation of forest resources in East Africa*. Nairobi, Kenya, African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) and World Conservation Union (IUCN) Eastern Africa Regional Office (EARO).
- Gathaara, G.** 1999. *Aerial survey of the destruction of Mt Kenya, Imenti and Ngare Ndare forest reserves*. Nairobi, Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS).
- Gereta, E., Wolanski, E., Borner, M. & Serneels, S.** 2002. Use of an ecohydrology model to predict the impact on the Serengeti ecosystem of deforestation, irrigation and the proposed Amala Weir Water Diversion Project in Kenya. *Ecohydrology and Hydrobiology*, 2(1-4): 135-142.
- IUCN (World Conservation Union).** 1996. *Forest cover and forest reserves in Kenya: policy and practice*. Nairobi, Kenya, IUCN-EARO.
- Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Kenya.** 1994. *The Kenya Forestry Master Plan*. Nairobi, Kenya.
- Njuguna, P., Mbegera, M. & Mbithi, D.** 1999. *Reconnaissance survey of forest blocks in the west and east of the Rift Valley*. Nairobi, Kenya, Permanent Presidential Commission on Soil Conservation and Afforestation. ♦

of exotic and indigenous tree species, the review of a new forest bill to replace the outdated Forest Act, and more recently the appointment of people who opposed the excisions to the government. The publicity created will also stop the government from contemplating allocation of reserved forest land.

LESSONS LEARNED

The case in Kenya shows the fundamental conflict between policy and practice. While the policy clearly emphasizes the conservation of forests without further degradation, the actions contradict the policy.

The people's perception that forests are critical to their livelihoods was instrumental in getting the public involved

in fighting for their conservation. Many Kenyans were able to link forests with values such as water conservation, income generation, flood control, rainfall, food and medicine, grazing lands during the dry season, tourism development and biodiversity conservation. Their awareness ensured that public utilities and environmentally crucial resources would not be exploited irresponsibly. The Kenyan case demonstrates that through capacity building by NGOs and civil society movements, people can acquire the strength to influence decisions made regarding their resources. It is also evident that it is imperative to involve all interested parties in decisions that affect their livelihoods as a way of avoiding conflicts over management of natural resources.